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Evoking a Spirit of Play: M&M's® Stories and (un)Real Possibilities for Teaching Secondary Literacy

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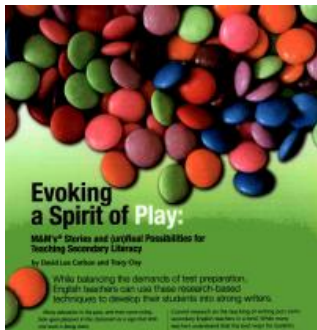
Abstract (summary)

The sample lesson shared here can be used with different age groups and can help administrators with professional development. [...] the techniques employed are informed by research and scholarship on the **teaching** of writing. 2003, 104-06) asserted that the primary goals of the teacher are to build the student's confidence and to help the student find a voice in his or her writing by growing the good.\ng., elements of fiction and nonfiction, poetry, themes in a novel, and classroom management (e.g., a fun Friday activity to teach students to work together, to teach open-mindedness. [...] they commented that the lesson encouraged them to "take some more risks" with their **teaching** because it gave them "creative, out-of-the-box methods" of **teaching** adolescents.

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Headnote

While balancing the demands of test preparation, English teachers can use these research-based techniques to develop their students into strong writers.



Many educators in the past, and even some today, look upon pleasure in the classroom as a sign that little real work is being done.

-Noddings (2003, 243)

Current research on the **teaching** of writing puts some secondary English teachers in a bind. While many teachers understand that the best ways for students to develop into strong writers is to encourage them to select personally relevant topics, de-emphasize mechanics, and provide opportunities to take risks, the message they receive from state and national policy makers is a different one (Kirby, Kirby, and Liner 2003). Many schools in the United States are required to meet state and national writing standards, which typically are gauged through high-stakes writing assessments.

The pressure to prepare adolescents to pass exams is quite onerous; it directly influences how teachers teach writing and, in turn, how teachers are prepared. For example, preservice teachers in some university courses typically rely on the six-traits rubric (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions) to guide their writing

curriculum because the state uses it to assess writing exams. Preservice teachers recognize, even before they enter the classroom, that they must prepare students to pass state exams.

Though many teachers appreciate the aesthetics of writing, they default to formulaic writing materials to prepare students to meet state standards. These materials typically do not include creative writing activities designed for adolescents to experiment with writing genres. Rarely is creative writing employed as a technique to improve scores on state writing assessments.

Though the research on the **teaching** of writing contests **teaching** to the test, secondary English teachers understand the impact state standards have on their **teaching** practices. As Jill McClay (in Barrell et al. 2004) suggested, the **teaching** of writing in secondary schools is akin to balancing two opposing forces on a tightrope walk. While there are several themes that could be put at each end of the tightrope (e.g., identity-culture versus theory-practice), this paper considers the balancing act of standardized tests versus a spirit of **play** in adolescent writing pedagogy. Preparing secondary English teachers involves showing them ways to negotiate these two ends.

Standardized tests have been placing a demanding burden on teachers, almost to the tipping point. Educators are urged to sway the balance back the other way to bring back the spirit of **play** into classrooms. While recognizing the demands of **teaching** (i.e., state standards, high-stakes tests), how can teachers incorporate a sense of **play** in their **teaching** of writing? The sample lesson shared here can be used with different age groups and can help administrators

with professional development. Moreover, the techniques employed are informed by research and scholarship on the **teaching** of writing.

Mixing Work and Play

The tension between standards-based **teaching** and **play** stems from a fundamental philosophical difference in what it means to learn. John Dewey's (1916) distinctions among work, **play**, and drudgery are instructive here. He asserted that learning involves being able to have direct interaction with materials and being able to participate in activities that are related to the real world. As such, the primary distinction between **play** and work is duration. While **play** is elastic, fluid, and spontaneous, work involves persevering through relationships that are more complex and persisting toward long-term goals. Work should involve moments of **play**. If work does not, it becomes drudgery, which refers to work that occurs under duress and does not have any significance for the person. In short, drudgery is not "intrinsically satisfying" (Dewey 1916, 204). While work and **play** can be pleasurable experiences, drudgery cannot.

Elliot Eisner (2005) argued that methods of **teaching** are shaped by educational virtues derived from two different philosophical schools. The first school - the productive school - equates schoolwork to the world of business, where competencies are linked to "predictability, control, and order" (Eisner 2005). **Teaching** and learning occur simultaneously as in a production line. Step-by-step, students learn the same material and are assessed by the same standards. In contrast, the second school - the romantic school - places greater emphasis on nurturing imagination, inspiring discovery, and building relationships. In this school, **teaching** and learning are more fluid and dynamic, not automated like machines.

Eisner (2005) claimed that as teachers push for higher test scores, students receive a lower quality of education; this is because creativity and exploration are vital components to expanding one's understanding of an ever-changing world. Instead of spending time prepping students to pass standardized exams, schools should try to understand "what teachers need in order to relate to students in ways that will make the pursuit of intrinsic intellectual satisfactions a primary aim of the educational enterprise" (Eisner 2005). Test scores, according to Eisner, tell little about the child's curiosity, his or her intellectual capacity, or his or her social-emotional abilities.

Research in the **teaching** of writing has indicated that balancing between the forces described earlier can be a challenging endeavor in schools. Fletcher (1996, 70), for example, suggested that focusing too much on "truth and accuracy" can stifle the development of a young writer. Psycholinguistic and socio-cultural theories of writing development support Fletcher's personal experiences. Dornan, Rosen, and Wilson (2002) suggested that to develop fluency, young writers need to experiment with words. In addition, research on learning grammar has indicated that **teaching** isolated skills does not necessarily improve writing abilities (Weaver 1996). At the high school level, students arrive with a variety of skills and attitudes about writing, which affect their performance in English classes. Shaughnessy (1977, 10) maintained that past experience "bears traces of the different pressures and codes and confusions" that impact how students view their English classes. To combat such "confusion," Kirby et al. (2003, 104-06) asserted that the primary goals of the teacher are to build the student's confidence and to help the student find a voice in his or her writing by "growing the good."

Some parents, teachers, and administrators are concerned that encouraging students to free-write and develop their voice without **teaching** specifically to tests may set up students to fail. However, Doman et al. (2002) debunked this common misunderstanding about effective methods to teach writing. They summarized the research on this issue: "Children and adolescents, through more reading and writing, begin to modify these patterns in the direction of traditional spelling patterns, syntactic patterns, and vocabulary choices" (Dornan et al. (2002, 22). As students engage with multiple forms of reading and writing, they move toward a deeper understanding of standard English. Hence, drill-and-skill may not be the best approach for preparing students to perform well on high-stakes exams. Rather, practicing writing in a variety of genres prepares students to recognize the links between audience, voice, and style, and thus may help them succeed on high-stakes exams.

Nonetheless, paying attention to standardized writing exams is a reality for many teachers in schools. Secondary English teachers need to develop strategies to mediate between the two ends of the tightrope - between preparing for standardized tests using formulaic strategies of writing and using fluid and playful strategies that encourage students to experience both work and pleasure. The following lesson, conducted with a group of preservice secondary English teachers, provides an example of how teachers can negotiate these conflicting strategies.

Sample Lesson

Often in secondary classrooms, teachers need to develop innovative strategies to propel students to put pen to paper. Instead of beginning a lesson on narrative with formal features (e.g., setting, plot, characterization), which is perhaps the standard way of **teaching** narrative structure, the lesson described here works in reverse. This means that each part of the lesson is designed to let students begin with their personal experiences and individual creativity to learn narrative structure.

As students complete each section of the lesson, they are able to use their imaginations and evoke a spirit of **play**. Only after the stories are composed do they recognize that they learned the formal features of a story. Furthermore, preservice teachers who participated in this lesson were able to see how they can use these effective **teaching** strategies for other lessons. The organization of the lesson, including the warm-up activities, the M&M's, the graphic organizer, the prompts, the silent discussion, and the final stories demonstrate how writing activities can be both playful and purposeful.

Warm-Up Activities

The lesson begins with a warm-up exercise asking students to respond to the following prompt:

You have been selected to be on the next season of the television show Survivor. To prepare for your season on the island, make a list of any three individuals and three items you would like to bring with you to the island.

The purpose of this prompt is for students to pick the most important people and items they would take with them on this trip. After they create their lists of individuals and items, students share their answers with the whole class. At this point, the class discusses what can be learned about a person based on the individuals and objects surrounding him or her.

Next, students make a list of three possible mistakes that a person could make during a typical day. Mistakes usually create conflicts, and different types of mistakes create different types of conflicts. When students list the mistakes, they reveal the general array of conflicts that appear in a story (e.g., internal-external; individual-group). At the conclusion of the warm-up activities, students have generated a small list of people, objects, and mistakes. They have started to make their word-bank, which is expanded in the next part of the lesson.

Graphic Organizer

To build a word-bank for the story writing, students receive a brown paper sack containing a prepared plastic bag of plain M&M's and two small Dixie' cups. One cup is labeled "sifter" and the other one is labeled "total." Systematically, students separate each color of M&M's, place them in the "sifter" cup, count how many they have, record that number on their graphic organizer (see figure 1), and dump the M&M's in the "total" cup. Each color of M&M's goes from the bag to the "sifter" cup, is counted, and then to the "total" cup. Once each color is sifted, counted, and recorded on the graphic organizer, students are prepared to create a word-bank for their stories.

Each color represents a different component of a story. For example, for each red candy, students list various seasons and months of the year. In figure 1, this student had six red M&M's, which means she had to list six different seasons or months. The word lists on the graphic organizer will be used to help students develop specific elements in their narratives, such as the setting and characters. The lists form an available word bank for students as they compose their stories, which they do in the next part of the lesson.

Silent Discussion

So far, students have compiled a word-bank of seasons, places, people, items, and events, and have a few ideas of mistakes that people can make. These are essential to a story. The next step is to incorporate its formal features (i.e., setting, plot, characters, conflict, climax, resolution). However, instead of having students write their own stories using their own word-banks, this lesson evokes spontaneous sparks of imagination to encourage students to be flexible. In short, the lesson format allows students to **play** with words and story form, and to have fun and experience pleasure as they learn. To accomplish these goals, students are assigned to a silent discussion to compose their stories as a group. They take their word-banks and a blank sheet of story paper into groups of five. During the silent discussion part of the lesson, as the name implies, there is no talking.

Prompts

Each student in the group begins with his or her own word-bank and story paper, and responds to the first prompt (see figure 2) by free-writing for 2-3 minutes. Afterward, without talking, each student gives his or her word-bank and story paper to the person on the left (clockwise). Then, students read what the previous person wrote and respond to prompt 2. Students continue to pass papers to the left after responding to a prompt until each student receives his or her original papers back. At the end of the activity, after students have responded to all the prompts, each student has a story composed along with the other members of his or her small group. The directions and writing prompts provided by

the teacher are shown in figure 2.

Figure 1. Summary of Word-Bank Activity

Color	Amount	Category	Examples	Elements of Narrative
Red	6	Seasons/Months of Year	Spring, August, Autumn, Summer, January, Winter	Setting, Conflict
Green	7	Places	Living Room, Park, Mom, Desert, Lighthouse, Subway Station, Baseball Field	Setting, Conflict
Blue	10	People	Mark Sanchez, Oprah Winfrey, Charles Dickens, Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, Mum, Beyonce, Jay-Z, Steve Nash, Miss America	Character, Conflict, Climax
Brown	6	Items	M&M's, Soccer shoes, Basketball, Coffee mug, Pen, Desk	Character, Setting, Conflict
Yellow	3	Events (e.g., cultural, sporting)	Thanksgiving, World Series, Superbowl, Spokenword Festival	Setting, Conflict
Orange	8	Free (add to the category of your color with the teacher's cards)	NCAA Basketball Tournament, World Series, Renaissance Festival, Black 'n' White Art exhibit, Party, reading, Super Bowl, Symphony performance	All

Figure 2. Summary of Silent-Discussion Activity

Order	Writing Prompt	Time (minutes)
1	Someone does something at some time. Directions after each prompt: Take your story paper and your word bank and give them to the person on your left. Remember that there is no talking during this exchange. Everyone should have a new story paper and word bank. You will build on the story that you have on front of you. Please take one minute to read the story paper and review the word bank. Then, using the word bank and the opening sentence of the story paper, respond to the next prompt. Remember to cross out one word from the word bank that you use in the story so that it can't be used again. Try to link the previous sentence with yours.	2-3
2	Someone makes a mistake (Conflict).	3-4
3	Someone ventures to another place, meets up with others, and attends an event (Setting).	3-4
4	Someone returns to the original place, goes on a talk show, and reveals a secret (Climax).	3-4
5	Someone makes a final decision (Resolution).	4-5
6	You are a newspaper reporter, and you have been assigned to write a story about this person. Include the 5 Ws (who, what, where, when, why) and 1 H (how) in your story.	4-5

Completed Story

Following is an example of a story that a group of preservice teachers completed using the described lesson format. Participants wrote spontaneously throughout the activity.

"The Silent Story of Sneaky Pete"

Last summer, Cheryl took a trip to Rome, Italy, with her husband, Tony. They visited his relatives in L'Aquila and toured the catacombs beneath St. Peter's Cathedral. Cheryl's parents accompanied them, and they all did crossword puzzles for most of the trip.

One thing they didn't realize is that they brought more than their souvenirs and completed crossword puzzles back from Rome. It turns out, without knowing of course, Tony brought an original page from the letters of Peter the Apostle that were stolen last March before they left on their trip. It was in the newspapers, but Tony was too busy doing the crosswords to notice. He found the stolen artifact tucked inside a beret when he was cleaning out his suitcase for this year's vacation to London. So, without really ever realizing it, Tony became a wanted man, and he was wanted by the

wrong people.

Tony, realizing his perilous position, left Cheryl to visit with her parents and do some holiday shopping. Tony arrived in San Francisco and attended a swanky party filled with mysterious guests with no last names. At the party, he was on the lookout for his contact - a sneaky man named Sneaky Pete. He waited impatiently, focused on resolving this issue - getting rid of Peter's letter and collecting \$1 .S million. The clock ticked on.

Sneaky Pete (aka Queen Elizabeth), one of the mysterious guests, had offered to pay a \$1.5 million reward for the return of her missing diamond encrusted tiara. Tony gave a sealed package containing the beret and Peter's letter to Sneaky Pete in exchange for an envelope full of cash. Almost in the clear, Tony was stopped before he could leave the party. Even though Tony was in a difficult position, he confessed that he intentionally gave Sneaky Pete the wrong item, and never had the tiara. When Sneaky Pete revealed her true identity, Tony knew he was in serious trouble. This time, he couldn't escape.

Because of his trickery, British law charged him with crimes against the Crown. However, the Queen chuckled at his antics and stated in her elegant English, "Let him go. The Pope will be thrilled by the return of Paul's letter." After she discovered her tiara in her very own dressing room, the Queen knighted Tony, and he has since resided at Windsor Castle.

What started out as a family vacation turned into a nightmare for Tony when he became a wanted man. Tony was found to be in possession of a rare letter written by St. Peter that had been stolen. His attempts to sell the document were stifled, however, when he was sidetracked by Queen Elizabeth, who was disguised as Sneaky Pete. Although the British Crown charged Tony with a crime, he was later exonerated and knighted by the Queen herself.

Applying Strategies

The preservice teachers who participated indicated in their reflections that they could see other ways they could use techniques from various parts of this lesson in their classrooms. Ideas varied from writing (e.g., news writing, sentence fluency, introducing the writing workshop), **teaching** literature (e.g., elements of fiction and nonfiction, poetry, themes in a novel), and classroom management (e.g., a fun "Friday activity" to teach students to work together, to teach open-mindedness). Moreover, they commented that the lesson encouraged them to "take some more risks" with their **teaching** because it gave them "creative, out-of-the-box methods" of **teaching** adolescents.

They also shared that the lesson altered how they plan to teach the elements of a story in the future. One preservice teacher commented, "Up to now, I have been **teaching** the elements of literature separately for fear of overloading students. This exercise addresses all the elements in one exercise." The participants understood that they need to prepare young adults to take standardized exams, and they also recognized that they can incorporate **play** into their **teaching** of writing.

Adapting the Lesson

The strategies used in this lesson can be adapted to meet the need of students at different levels and to support administrators who design professional development for their schools. For example, making lists is a great way to start individuals on an assignment because most people, even those who may struggle with writing, feel confident enough in their abilities to compile a list of one-word answers.

The silent discussion also can be adapted. Place students (or adults) in groups of 4-6 and give each person in the group a different quotation on a specific theme, such as leadership or community. Allow each participant 2-3 minutes to read the quotation and write a response to it on a sheet of paper. Each person then passes his or her paper to the left and responds to another quotation. This continues until everyone gets back his or her original quotation.

Another technique is to give each individual a 5x7 note card and arrange participants in a large-group circle. Ask the group a series of 4-6 questions and have each person respond on his or her own note card. Students then pass their cards clockwise to give everyone a chance to read everyone else's responses. This strategy allows students to hear from each person in the circle, instead of potentially just a few students who feel comfortable speaking in class. These are just some of the ways that the strategies described can be adjusted in the classroom and to meet the needs of administrators.

Closing Thoughts

Standards and high-stakes testing are realities for classroom teachers. Adolescents need to perform well on tests, and teachers need to demonstrate how their lessons meet state standards. Yet, teachers can teach and students can learn in a playful way.

Preservice and practicing teachers can expand their pedagogical imaginations and, by doing so, devise creative methods of **teaching** English in secondary schools. By increasing their array of strategies, they can reach the diverse learners in their classrooms. Perhaps most important, however, is the realization that when students are sorting M&M's, passing papers clockwise, giggling, and composing stories collectively, they are playing, experiencing pleasure, and completing real work.

Sidebar

"Making lists is a great way to start individuals on an assignment."

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